

Marine Turtle Conservation Fund

On July 2nd, 2004, the Marine Turtle Conservation Act of 2004 (Act) was signed into law by the United States Congress. The legislation was enacted to ensure the long-term survival of these imperiled species, by assisting in the conservation of marine turtles and their nesting habitats in foreign countries.

Marine turtles — much beloved species around the world — are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans with ancestors dating back over 100 million years. Seven species of marine turtles currently navigate the oceans. While all species require tropical, subtropical or temperate oceanic beaches for nesting, each has specific marine habitat and feeding requirements.

Six marine turtles are considered imperiled by the World Conservation Union: The green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), the loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), the hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), the Kemp's ridley (*Lepidochelys kempii*), and the olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). Only the flatback turtle (*Natator depressus*), which occurs in the near shore and inshore waters of Australia, is not currently considered endangered.

All marine turtle species require many years to reach sexual maturity (10-40 years depending on the species), have complex life cycles, depend on oceanic beaches for nesting, specific marine foraging habitats, and are very vulnerable to human exploitation as well as human caused degradation of their habitats.

Once abundant, marine turtle populations in the Indian, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, are a fraction of their levels prior to human over-exploitation.

Major threats on nesting beaches include legal or illegal over-exploitation of eggs or meat, depredation of eggs by natural predators as well as dogs and domestic hogs, light pollution from developments which disorients hatchlings and nesting females, and coastal riprap, sea walls, revetments, sand bags or other hard structures. Major threats in the marine environment include legal directed fisheries for marine turtles in some countries, accidental capture by trawl, net and long-line commercial fisheries, and destruction or degradation of grass beds and coral reefs.

While long-term conservation efforts are showing success for some species or populations such as the Kemp's ridley, other nesting populations such as those for East Pacific leatherbacks have crashed and face imminent extinction. The Act was established in recognition of the global plight of marine turtles and need for increased conservation efforts on nesting beaches throughout the world. The Act establishes a dedicated fund

administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) to support a range of conservation efforts protecting nesting populations and beaches in foreign countries.

Because marine turtles are highly migratory and far ranging species, successful conservation requires long-term efforts and close cooperation among countries sharing the same oceans. While the Service has a long history of working with other countries on marine turtle conservation, the fund will build new partnerships with governments, non-government organizations, and the private sector to achieve this goal.

The Act provides the Service with a timely and important opportunity to expand existing efforts and support for on-the-ground conservation initiatives on behalf of the world's imperiled marine turtles. It is a responsibility that the Service and its many conservation partners will take very seriously to help save these ancient and charismatic species.



Green sea turtle returning to sea after nesting.
USFWS/Earl Possardt

The 2005 Congressional Appropriation of nearly \$100,000, leveraged almost \$195,000 in matching funds and in-kind donations from other marine turtle stakeholders, and allowed the Service to fund seven innovative marine turtle conservation projects. These projects include:

- Promoting the long-term survival of the depleted nesting sea turtle populations in Borgor Point, Liberia, by working with the local community to protect nests. This project includes setting up fishing cooperatives to increase fishing income as an alternative to hunting sea turtles.
- Supporting the recovery of the Pearl Cays hawksbill rookery in Nicaragua, through nesting surveys, protection of nests and nesting turtles, and promoting conservation through local media and community education and involvement.
- Developing a sustainable and effective leatherback conservation program in Gabon and Congo, which host one of the two largest leatherback populations in the world. This was achieved by holding a meeting of all partners, government authorities and stakeholders to identify priorities and better coordinate nesting beach activities, as well as conducting aerial surveys to assess country wide status of the nesting population.
- Supporting recovery efforts on secondary nesting beaches for leatherbacks at Playa Ventura, Mexico. This project trains local people to protect nests, and will produce a training manual for local community marine turtle conservation initiatives.
- Protecting turtles and their habitats in Tanzania by filling information gaps on the status, distribution and threats of sea turtles at key sites in coastal districts, expanding public awareness and education about the status and threats to turtles, and enhancing capacity for monitoring, research and management of turtles and their habitats within these districts.
- Enabling authorities to improve surveys and assessments of loggerhead and green sea turtle nesting populations in Oman and rescue stranded nesting female turtles.
- Ensuring the protection of nesting females and eggs on the Rekawa nesting rookery in Southern Sri Lanka by providing an alternative, sustainable income to local community members previously dependent on marine turtle egg gathering. The project also increases local education and awareness on marine turtles, and provides a field study site where university, government and non-government organization personnel receive "in-situ" training on marine turtle research and conservation methodology.

Marine Turtle Conservation Fund Appropriation in 2005

Total Number of Grant Proposals Received	55
Total Number of Grants Awarded	7
Total Amount Appropriated by U.S. Congress	\$98,610
Total Funds Distributed through Grants	\$89,610
Total Funds to Administration of Grants	\$9,000
Total Matching/In-kind Funds Leveraged by Grants	\$194,865



Green sea turtle nesting
USFWS/Earl Possardt



Loggerhead sea turtle hatchling
USFWS

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